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Indian Hill Elementary murals depict three immigrants, and students helped color in the images

By Andrew J. Nelson / World-Herald staff writer Oct 10, 2015



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BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Third-grader Kamilla Menjivar, 8, helps paint outdoor murals created by artist Watie White. White said any student who helps work on the images will have a shared connection and ownership of them.

When Sharon Royers, principal of Indian Hill Elementary School in South Omaha, asked a gathering of her students Friday afternoon how many were children of immigrants, roughly half raised their hands.

It was because of the large number of students from immigrant families in her school, she said, that she readily agreed to display three large murals depicting recent immigrants and their experiences right on the front of the school, facing U Street.

"That is the student body that we serve," she said. "It honors their heritage, no matter what country they are from ... we honor you here, and we want you here."

The debut of the murals was marked Friday afternoon with a gathering on the front lawn of the school and included remarks from artist Watie White, Royers and others and performances by a mariachi band and the school's swing choir.

Two of the three murals show two Indian Hill students: Abdihalim Madobe, 10, and Sandra Bleoussi, 11. Both came to the United States in 2012; Abdihalim from Uganda, Sandra from Togo.

White designed the outline of each mural and has started painting them. After the ceremony ended, students at Indian Hill also painted parts of the murals. White will put the finishing touches on next week.

"Anyone who comes and paints on it is going to feel a connection to it, ownership of it," White said.

Each mural has a black-and-white image of a person's face — Abdihalim's, Sandra's and that of Ramona Silva Gonzales, an older woman who lived in South Omaha for a time before returning to Mexico.

Each image has a quote from the person uttered as White interviewed and sketched their image. Each phrase, he said, seemed to capture the essence of the person.

Abdihalim spoke of his brothers making him laugh. Sandra talked of Cinderella ripping a dress. "When I grow up, I want to be a fashion designer. I like dresses," her quote reads, in part. Gonzales told of singing and picking flowers with her cousins.



White said the goal was to "make something that emphasizes our common humanity ... to really kind of find a picture of yourself in the life story of someone else, whose perspective and whose history is very much unlike your own."

Abdihalim and Sandra joined their classmates in painting their portraits Friday afternoon.

The murals are part of a partnership among White, Omaha Public Schools and Justice for our Neighbors-Nebraska, an immigrant advocacy group. It was made possible with several grants.

"They are going to be up there for generations," White told the kids about the murals, before their part in the painting began. "The stuff you paint on that mural ... it's probably going to be there as long as the bricks are there because it's going to be really hard to get off."

Contact the writer: 402-444-1310, andrew.nelson@owh.com, twitter.com/nelson_aj



Omaha school paints large mural of immigrants

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